

Air Force band jazzes up Skywalker Ranch

AF Band of the Golden West cuts CD to symbolize the "Changing Times"

By Michael T. Moseley
Daily Republic/Hanson

It's the home of the man who created Luke Skywalker, Jabba the Hut and Darth Vader, but last week George Lucas's Skywalker Ranch in Marin County was the home-away-from-home to the Air Force Band of the Golden West.

The Travis-based commander's jazz ensemble was able to use the Lucas Arts recording studio, a converted winery, Thursday and Friday to record what band commander Capt. Doug Monroe calls a unique and meaningful CD.

"If it wasn't for the captain, there's no way we would be here right now recording this," said Master Sgt. Dave Snider, the band's NCOIC. "To take the music he's chosen and jazz it up a little bit, even add in a little funk, is what this CD's all about."

Trumpet player Staff Sgt. Jon Huff agrees: "We're trying to reach as wide an audience as possible with this type of music. It's as crossover as we can get. We hope people will want to listen to it more than once because it should be fun. We want to reach the younger generation."

Appropriately, the title of the 12-song CD will be "Changing Times" and Monroe touts it as their contribution to the new Air Force mission.

"The songs we're recording are songs we've been doing for the past couple of years and we wanted to capture that," Monroe said. "The only way we make a recording, though, is if it reflects on the Air Force and communicates Air Force messages. We felt this type of music would be good and enable us to talk about the difference in what the Air Force was 50 years ago and what it is today — the whole difference of planning for two major wars on the planet verses the whole (Expeditionary Aerospace Force) concept."

The CD will not only illustrate the differences musically, but even the cover will reflect the changing of the times.

"The cover will have a picture of the CH-47 transport aircraft melded with a C-17, so you see the transition from the old World War II aircraft to the state-of-the-art weapons system," Monroe said. "The CD itself is about how musically the change has been made as well."

The making of the CD itself proved to be quite a "total concept" undertaking. Scores and scores of sheet music, instructing each instrument in its particular execution, had to be produced and arranged. Instead of going to outside sources for the musical arrangements, however, Monroe relied on his in-house talent.

"Dave (Snider) did all of the arrangements," Monroe said. "He did an outstanding job."

On the other hand, Monroe did seek talent from other Air Force bands in order to make the CD even stronger. The talent he sought is singer and Chief Master Sgt. Marcelle Hureau.

"I begged and pleaded, even got down on my hands and knees and asked her to come out and do this performance. Finally, j3 she agreed," Monroe explained.

Hureau is on loan from the Air Force Band of the Rockies, one of the Air Force's premier show bands, stationed at Peterson AFB, Colo.

"I jumped at the opportunity to come down here and do this," Hureau said. "This place (Skywalker Ranch) reminds me a lot of Colorado."

Hureau was been performing in Air Force bands for 25 years and this CD will be her 15th.

"Her vocal range is just astounding," Monroe said. "It's great to have her working with us."

The only civilian on the CD is the stand-in keyboard player, Casey Filson from Fairfield.

"We were in a bit of a bind," Monroe explained. "Our keyboard player separated and we had to find someone to replace him quickly. We looked for a professional and found Casey. He's an incredibly gifted keyboardist. He can sit in there and play an improvised piece and we get it on the first take."

Getting it on the first take is also important to Skywalker Ranch's chief recording engineer Leslie Jones. Jones along with assistant recording engineer Dann Thompson, worked closely with the Travis crew.

"They're very professional," Jones said. "I've enjoyed working with

them very much. We haven't run into one problem. They know their stuff and we just sit here and record what they do."

Though Jones makes it sound easy, watching her handle two laptops and a huge sound board like a maestro handles a symphony orchestra is something to see.

Lucas's studio, a mere portion of Skywalker Sound production company, is large enough to fit such an orchestra in its massive recording booth, complete with a full-sized movie screen overhead. Jones has worked on several movie scores for Lucas Films and knows that the facility is more than adequate for any recording project.

"I've been doing this for 25 years, five years here," Jones said. "It's just a great place to work."

How did the band come to use Skywalker Ranch for this recording session?

"Our soundman, Tech. Sgt. Mike Atwood, knew Leslie from way back," Monroe said. "We came down and looked at the place some time ago, but for one reason or another, never used it. This time, we decided to go for it."

And go for it, they did. The band enjoyed not only recording in the technical building at Skywalker, but they also thrilled at bicycling and skateboarding over the entire compound.

The ranch, nestled among the redwoods of Nicasio, Calif., covers more than 4,700 acres and is open only to employees and invited guests. Lucas Film has recently acquired four neighboring ranches, adding more than 3,000 acres to the Skywalker Ranch, but the vast majority of this additional land will remain undeveloped with less than 15 acres covered by new construction.

"It's a fabulous facility and an outstanding crew," Monroe said. "We're very fortunate and proud to be able to use it."

The CD is scheduled to be released later this fall.

Members of the Band of the Golden West playing on the CD

Producer

Capt. Douglas Monroe

Bass/arrangements

Master Sgt. Dave Snider

Vocals

Chief Master Sgt. Marcelle Hureau

Staff Sgt. Kim Lively

Trombone

Staff Sgt. Christie Anderson

Saxophone

Tech. Sgt. Anthony Seres — tenor

Senior Airman Mieke Bruggenman — baritone

Airman 1st Class Joseph Wagner — Alto

Trumpet

Staff Sgt. Jonathan Ruff

Staff Sgt. Scott Sauer

Airman 1st Class Lonnie Dooley

Drums

Senior Airman Marshall Gentry

Percussion

Airman 1st Class Troy Griffin

Guitar

Staff Sgt. Gary Rosenak

Tuba

Senior Airman Vladimir Tchekan

Keyboards

Casey Filson



(Above), Staff Sgt. Kim Lively belts out a tune for the Air Force Band of the Golden West's latest CD. Lively is one of two vocalists featured on the album. Chief Master Sgt. Marcelle Hureau, a member of the Air Force Band of the Rockies from Peterson AFB, Colo., joins Lively as the second vocalist. (Left), Senior Airman Marshall Gentry adds the drum track to the CD from his isolation booth behind the main recording area. Performers in such booths are connected to the rest of the ensemble by headphones that allow them to hear the other musicians as well as the technicians actually doing the recording.



(Above), Capt. Doug Monroe, commander of the Air Force Band of the Golden West, looks over the musical score as Skywalker Ranch chief recording engineer Leslie Jones works her magic to record the band's newest CD, "changing Times." (Right), The band's bass player and NCOIC, Master Sgt. Dave Snider, pounds out a rhythm on his upright bass. Skywalker Ranch has separate recording booths allowing technicians to isolate certain instruments, like the bass, and record them on independent sound tracks for mixing.

